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WHAT I HAVE LEARNED FROM THE REACTIONS TO MY BOOKS

MICHAEL CRICHTON*

To prepare for the conference, I decided to review what I had learned about writing on controversial subjects over the past forty years. To tell the truth, I hadn't learned much. But the first lesson, I learned very early.

LESSON 1: PEOPLE LIVE IN THE PAST

When *The Andromeda Strain* was published in 1969,¹ it was widely perceived as “exciting and cutting-edge.” But I knew that it was based on twenty-year-old technology. One of the characters was based on a scientist named Joshua Lederberg who had won the Nobel Prize in 1958² for work he had done much earlier than that. So for my next novel I decided to write something more up-to-date, because I thought that was what people wanted.

*The Terminal Man*³ in 1972 was based on an actual patient who had undergone psychosurgery, had had electrodes implanted in their brain, and was being monitored by computer. I also added atomic pacemakers (then being implanted in dogs), and some then-fashionable talk about cybernetic feedback. The difference in the public response was striking.

Twenty-year-old technology was considered “a dazzling vision of tomorrow” but modern technology was “simply unbelievable.”

From this I drew my first lesson, which is that people live in the past. If you describe to people what is going on in laboratories today, they'll just refuse to believe it. The world they inhabit is a world out of date. This is, I suppose, a truism. Nobody lives in the present. But for a novelist dealing

* Michael Crichton was an award-winning author, producer and director, and a Harvard-educated physician. His highly successful works of fiction often featured factual scientific and medical underpinnings. He is the only person ever to have had the number one movie, number one television series, and number one novel in the United States at the same time. This article is based on remarks given by Michael Crichton on May 21, 2007 at the “Who Owns Your Body?” conference at Chicago-Kent College of Law.

1. MICHAEL CRICHTON, *THE ANDROMEDA STRAIN* (Alfred A. Knopf 1969; paperback, Ballantine 1992).

2. Official Website of the Nobel Foundation, *The Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine 1958*, http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/medicine/laureates/1958/ (last visited Oct. 1, 2009).

3. MICHAEL CRICHTON, *THE TERMINAL MAN* (Alfred A. Knopf 1972; paperback, Harper Collins 2002).

with technology it means that you talk about what is actually going on at your peril. People won't believe it.

I learned my lesson and set my next two novels firmly in the past, one in Victorian England⁴ and the other in tenth-century Scandinavia.⁵ Both were cheerfully received by reviewers who found them entirely credible, even though they were in truth far more fanciful than my previous books had been.

LESSON 2: MEDIA AUTHORITIES ALSO LIVE IN THE PAST

I went back to science with *Congo*⁶ in 1980, a story about an expedition to Africa featuring a gorilla that uses sign language. The ordinary reviewers in *Newsweek*⁷ and the *Wall Street Journal*⁸ were contemptuous, and they particularly focused on the absurdity of anyone having an ape that could use sign language. The *Journal* said it was a "colossal overstatement"⁹ to suggest that apes were capable of conversation, and *Newsweek* said the book asked us to believe the ridiculous notion that apes could talk.¹⁰

I would have thought that everyone was familiar with Koko, a gorilla studied by Penny Patterson.¹¹ Koko was at Stanford; she had been on the cover of *National Geographic*¹² two years before; she had been on the cover of *The New York Times Magazine*; she had been on NBC television, where she had signed during her interview, saying "bright lights don't like them" and "stupid person go away" about the interviewer, which seemed to be clear evidence of intelligence.

Finally someone who had written a scholarly book on the subject of apes and language wrote the *Journal* referring to the "ill-informed denigration"¹³ of the book and stating that "the reviewer ought to stick to review-

4. MICHAEL CRICHTON, *THE GREAT TRAIN ROBBERY* (Alfred A. Knopf 1975; paperback, Harper Collins 2002).

5. MICHAEL CRICHTON, *EATERS OF THE DEAD* (Alfred A. Knopf 1976; paperback, Ballantine 1998).

6. MICHAEL CRICHTON, *CONGO* (Alfred A. Knopf 1980; paperback, Ballantine 1993).

7. Peter Prescott, *Amy the Gorilla; Congo. By Michael Crichton. 348 pages. Knopf. \$10.95.*, *NEWSWEEK*, Dec. 15, 1980, at 97D.

8. Raymond Sokolov, *Michael Crichton: Separating Fact from Fiction*, *WALL ST. J.*, Jan. 14, 1981, at 26.

9. *Id.*

10. Prescott, *supra* note 7, at 97D.

11. FRANCINE PATTERSON AND EUGENE LINDEN, *THE EDUCATION OF KOKO* (1981).

12. Francine Patterson, *Conversations with a Gorilla*, *NAT'L GEOGRAPHIC*, Oct. 1978, at cover.

13. Eugene Linden, Letter to the Editor, *Can Gorillas Converse With Us?*, *WALL ST. J.*, Jan. 29, 1981, at 25.

ing books on subjects he knows something about.”¹⁴

From this I learned my second lesson: mainstream media authorities who profess specific knowledge also live in the past. And indeed, much of what we are exposed to in newspapers and television is outdated—structurally, conceptually, and just plain factually. The news actually presents you a world that has already vanished.

LESSON 3: NOT ALL FIELDS ARE EQUALLY RIGOROUS

I want to contrast this with a book I did in 1996 called *Airframe*¹⁵ which is about the aerospace industry. What fascinated me particularly was the response from aerospace reviewers. In both the United States and Europe, the technical reviews were extraordinarily accurate.

Reviewers correctly identified the actual incidents that had been fictionalized in the book: the Alaska Airlines incident and the two China Airlines crashes. They identified the sources I had used, they identified the positions I had taken on certain controversies within the field, they even went so far as to say I had spent more time doing research at McDonnell Douglas than I had at Boeing, which was absolutely true. They were extraordinarily well-informed and able to deduce the factual underpinnings of the book.

The reaction to *Next*¹⁶ in the technical journals was surprisingly different. Here I found that reviewers were unaware of the factual basis of some of the stories, even the ones that were really famous, the ones that were twenty or thirty years old that you would think everyone would know, even then the reviewers didn’t seem to know that I was telling thinly-disguised true stories.¹⁷ They were unaware of discussions that had appeared in the journals in which they themselves were writing their reviews. They were really not up on the literature. They confused bio and pharma, which is a bit like confusing nuclear power and nuclear family. They failed to identify important issues of interest to scientists and researchers. It was really very surprising.

Ordinarily, when a writer gets ignorant reviews, it’s because the reviewer didn’t read the book. But in this case, it seemed they didn’t really understand the field. They didn’t know what I was talking about.

So comparing these two books leads me to some interesting conclu-

14. *Id.*

15. MICHAEL CRICHTON, *AIRFRAME* (Alfred A. Knopf 1995; paperback, Ballantine 1996).

16. MICHAEL CRICHTON, *NEXT* (Harper Collins 2006).

17. Michael Goldman, *Calamity Gene: When Biotechnology Spins Out of Control*, 445 NATURE 819–820 (2007).

sions. One is that aerospace is a much slower-moving field, so people have an ability to be well grounded, and the other point which I think is significant is that engineers are held to a higher information standard than scientists. This is something we can all look at for the future. Engineers are accustomed to validating their work, they are prepared to be sued based on what they do, and in general they treat information with far more seriousness than many scientists do.

LESSON 4: WHO'S WRITING THE FICTION?

The final thing I want to talk to you about is the way we are all exposed to an intense focus on the future—what's next, what's coming, what's just around the corner—as if the future can be known.

I am often accused of being a fiction writer who is intruding into serious intellectual discourses and I want to begin by observing for everyone that my fiction is always labeled. Unlike some other people. My fiction is labeled “fiction” even when it's true. Other people—especially in the media—make claims of truth when they are reporting pure fiction.

Let's take some examples. The BBC reported some time back that “Blondes Are Going to Die Out in 200 Years.”¹⁸ This story is totally false. It is a fabrication, based on nothing. The article says there is a study by experts in Germany; there are no experts and there is no study. It says there is a WHO researcher; no such researcher exists. It is utterly, totally false.

Next is one of my favorites: “Bigfoot Risks Extinction.”¹⁹ A Canadian MP wants to put Bigfoot on the endangered species list. As a novelist I would never dare to write something like this.

Here's another: “UFO science key to halting climate change, says former Canadian defense minister.”²⁰ I would agree to that.

Some of you may have seen the story about the Japanese having been fooled by buying sheep that were sold to them as poodles.²¹ This story rocketed around the Internet and again, it is totally false. What's interesting is that the media now reports it as a hoax. It was never a hoax. It was always a fake story. A Japanese actress appeared on television and she said

18. *Blondes to 'Die Out in 200 year,'* BBC NEWS, Sep. 27, 2002, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/health/2284783.stm>.

19. Agence France-Presse, *Bigfoot Risks Extinction, says Canadian MP*, RAW STORY, May 2, 2007, http://rawstory.com/news/afp/Bigfoot_risks_extinction_says_Canad_05022007.html.

20. Agence France-Presse, *UFO Science Key to Halting Climate Change: Former Canadian Defense Minister*, RAW STORY, Feb. 28, 2007, http://rawstory.com/news/afp/UFO_science_key_to_halting_climate__02282007.html.

21. *Ewe've Been Conned Ladies*, SUN, Apr. 26, 2007, <http://www.thesun.co.uk/sol/homepage/news/article26670.ece>.

that she had a friend who had been fooled in this way. Whether or not there was ever such a friend, or whether it was just an amusing story such as you might tell on Leno, was never determined. The story got picked up, put together, made into a whole conspiracy. And of course it is fundamentally racist to suggest that Japanese are strange people who can't tell the difference between a dog and a sheep. (One of the headlines said they wondered why the dog didn't bark.)²² The point is the entire story is media generated.

Here is a hardy perennial: "What Would Happen If The Robots Turned Against Us?"²³ As far as I can tell this story has been repeated for two hundred years.

Here's a BBC story. A researcher from the London School of Economics reported that in 100,000 years, our species would split in two, in keeping with an H.G. Wells story.²⁴ I always enjoy being told what is going to happen 100,000 years from now. But the researcher made a prediction for only 1,000 years from now, which was that all men will have big willies, and women pert breasts.²⁵ This led the British press to ask whether the prediction would stand up.

In conclusion, what I found is that people really do live in the past. They don't understand what is going on now. They focus on the future, which is absolutely unknowable. As a result, the change, which is happening right now in the present, is happening where no one is really looking.

And I think the topic of this conference is an example of change occurring without society giving much scrutiny, but I am looking forward to this conference, because I think we are going to talk about what is happening in the present. And it should be very exciting.

22. *Id.*

23. *What Would Happen if the Robots Turned Against us?*, DAILY MAIL, Apr. 30, 2007, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-451016/What-happen-robots-turned-us.html>.

24. *Human Species 'May Split in Two,'* BBC NEWS, Oct. 17, 2006, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/6057734.stm.

25. *All Men Will Have Big Willies*, SUN, Oct. 17, 2006, <http://www.thesun.co.uk/sol/homepage/news/article67423.ece>.

